

GUIDE - Powerful GOOD COMMUNICATION rehearsal phrases

This guide is to be read alongside the pdf scripts to each video of our series- **preparing to communicate in mediation.**

So much conflict is down to misunderstanding, misinformation and misperception resulting from the poor quality of our communication.

So, let's start with and accept, if you will, the principle and understanding that we are all responsible for the messages we communicate, how they are communicated and, to some extent, how they are received and how we receive them.

On this webpage you will find a range of videos covering various aspects and skills required for good communication. Each video has a pdf script you can download, if you prefer to read these. You can also use the scripts to practice and rehearse from.

There is certainly much we can do to ensure that the messages we want to convey are the messages that are actually received. So, let's have a look at some of these things we can do;

Observation and evaluation/judgement – 'Don't put the blame on me'

First, let's focus on distinguishing the process of observation from evaluation and judgement. Why is it so important in our communication with each other that we resist evaluation and judgement of each other.

I don't know about you, but if I think I am being judged, and particularly judged unfairly, I find it hard to keep my emotions in check and not to react by trying to 'put the record straight', especially if I think someone else might be watching or listening in. I wouldn't want them to get the wrong impression about me, especially if they are the mediator!

Therefore, when you explain to someone what it is they had said or did to trigger an anger in you and, before you ask them whether they are willing to change their behaviour, I recommend that you carefully frame your message to avoid perpetuating the argument.

So, if you tell someone that they have a loud mouth, they are likely to feel criticised and judged.

What do you actually mean? Do you mean that the person always interrupts you when you are talking?

It is important that you are specific and factual about their behaviour you are finding hard, asking them to change rather than mixing observation with evaluation or judgement by describing the person as a loud mouth or domineering or such like.

'I notice that whenever I talk about X, you get really agitated and don't let me finish what I am saying which I am finding very frustrating (Observation and expressing feeling- see next heading). Would you be willing to let me finish my point if I promise to do the same for you?' I am conscious that you

are finding this conversation difficult, so I am very willing to find out why this is, in a moment. Is that ok?'(request-see below)

Next, let's look at how to express feeling so that another person can understand and hear how you are feeling and hopefully, respond in an appropriate way.

Feelings

In doing so, we rely on our emotional literacy and 'feeling vocabulary' we already have.

Have a look at the list of feeling words on this webpage and notice how many there are in addition to those you already use.

I often hear people say that they feel that things are not going their way or they feel that it would be unfair. This is not a feeling but an opinion. It would be more accurate to say; I think that things are not going their way or they think it would be unfair (and then perhaps go onto explain how you feel about this)

In fact, it is not necessary to use the word 'feel' to express a feeling at all, so you could say; I am feeling angry or you could just say; I am angry.

If you think or say, I feel incompetent, you are really assessing yourself rather expressing a feeling.

If you think or say, I feel frustrated because of my incompetence, you are expressing a feeling about how you think about yourself, as incompetent.

So, separate what you think and what you feel. They are quite different !

Once you are clear about what a feeling is, you can begin to distinguish between feelings, thoughts and interpretations, and express clearly to others how you are feeling and why and, importantly, how you would prefer to feel and how you do, in fact, feel when your needs are met.

When we are clear about our feelings, as I covered in my video about practice and role play, we can begin to take more responsibility about how we frame in our minds what we think about information we receive and therefore, begin to influence how we feel and respond to it (see article on framing and reframing).

Next let's focus on identifying the needs and unmet needs, in us and others that sit behind these feelings

Needs – 'Say what you mean, mean what you say'

What others say and do, can trigger or stimulate but is never the cause us to feel a particular way.

Our feelings are the result of, among other things;

- Our beliefs about the other person (including our conscious and unconscious biases about them). We can of course change these.
- How we choose to interpret and frame what they say or do (based on these beliefs and what goes on in the moment that might feed into our beliefs/prejudices about them.
- Our particular interests, needs and expectations, in that moment, which can change.

For a good example of this in action, please watch my video about the importance of practice and role play and the interaction between the parents about the seatbelt.

Essentially, we have 4 options with what we do, when we receive a negative message such as a perceived judgement, criticism or complaint;

1. Blame ourselves for it
2. Blame others, which can feel appealing because we then, in our minds avoid having to accept any responsibility for how we feel and behave in response.
3. Connect with our feelings and needs so that we can express these to each other
4. Get in touch with the feelings and needs of the other person so that we can engage with these and respond appropriately

Nos 3 and 4 create an open, honest dialogue leading to great understanding and empathy.

Science and research tells us that blame, judgement, self justification, entitlement and so on, reduces a person's capacity to connect with, understand and empathise with others, significantly reduces the quality of community and likelihood of a successful mediation.

I love the following phrases which can be used in any number of ways and are designed to get to the unmet need.

What are you needing (for yourself/from me) that you are not receiving at the moment or

Please help me to understand what you feel you are not getting from me, at the moment

You may need to sensitively probe and help the person to clarify this for themselves

Is there anything else or Is there something else (If your intuition is picking up that there might be something else).

So, if someone says to you, 'that's just not fair' you may want to ask;

What needs to happen or change for you to think it is fair?

What would it mean to you/ What would a fair outcome look like to you?

When we learn to communicate what we mean with the intention and commitment of improving our communication and relationship, based on a dialogue around our values, what we feel and what we need for ourselves and each other, we will make progress.

Have a look at our video all about the importance of intent and our guide showing you how to prepare your own statement of intent.

Having clarified for ourselves what we need, we then have to convey this to the others.

Make requests not demands

The key here to this ensure that what we are asking for is perceived as a request, not a demand because as soon as it is perceived as a demand you are likely to encounter resistance.

As Marshall B Rosenberg writes in his book Nonviolent Communication, 'when people hear anything that sounds like a criticism (to them), they tend to invest their energy in self- defence or counter attack.'

Instead, the more accurately we can connect our feelings to our needs and convey this when we make our requests, the easier it will be for others to reflect this and respond to us compassionately based on their own core values, failing which they are left having to justify to themselves why they are not prepared to do so.

Unfortunately, rather than caring what others feel like and why they are behaving in a way we find difficult, we all too often instantly look for what is wrong with others when our needs are not being met rather than what we can do for them and what we can ask them to do to meet our needs.

In the parent example I use in video 4, when the mother receives some news from a neighbour, initially she does not give the father the benefit of the doubt or particularly want to listen to his version of events, accusing him of being all sorts of things including being untrustworthy, because she is anxious, defensive and she believes that her own need to be appreciated, valued and respected as a parent, is not being met by the father.

Consequently, the husband immediately feels on the defensive, believing that the mother's intention is to blame, judge and ultimately, control and punish him, a feeling which unless 'nipped in the bud' by the husband, will serve to further fuel the conflict and damage to the relationship.

Having identified what you may be needing from the other person, the aim is to ask the other person to give you something, do something or say something that you need in a way that increases the chances of them giving it to doing this.

- Avoid the perception that it is a demand rather than a request.

'Would you be willing to give me 10 minutes longer...'

'Would you be willing to give me 2 mins to explain..'

Asking whether someone would be willing to do something infers that they have a choice but don't blame, judge or punish them if they decide that they cannot do what you ask of them just yet otherwise they are likely to conclude that, however you framed it, it was never a request but a demand (a demand dressed up in 'request clothing'). The request has to come from caring and wanting to improve the quality of communication.

Be specific with your request than leaving it too open to interpretation. Ask for specific unambiguous actions, limiting the chance for misinterpretation

So try to avoid saying for example; 'I want you to give me some space' but rather,

'Would you be willing to give me some time to spend with X because I am hoping that this would help us to work on our relationship together'

It can sometimes be hard to make clear requests but think how hard it must be for others to respond in a way we need them to when we are not clear ourselves.

Ask for the person to do something NOT to stop doing something – explain what you want rather than what you don't want them to say or do.

The same applies when you are talking to yourself. So, rather than say, 'There is no way I am going to do that again', say, 'next time I am going to do or say more of the following.' It will put you in a more positive mindset.

When people complain about something or someone, they often say; I wish he didn't do or say X' or 'stop doing that' or 'I hate it when you do that'. When asked what it is they want or need, they struggle to express it in positive language.

Example 1

When you turn up late, I think that you just don't care and that really frustrates me- Would you be willing to turn up on time NOT don't turn up late

Example 2

*It would really help this process if you would please take time to listen to what I have to say
NOT please stop ignoring me*

- Making requests consciously (conscious communication)

We can express our feelings in any number of ways and incorrectly assume or expect the listener to understand the underlying unmet need and request.

We often talk at people, rather than converse with them. The Greek word 'dialogue' means a flow of meaning, not a one way flow of meaning!

What if someone says to you.

'How could you forget to pick up those papers I asked you to pick up'.

If you had forgotten for very justifiable reasons to pick them up, you might feel that trying to make you feel guilty, whereas the speaker may have simply been conveying disappointment and frustration but also possibly the need for the person to go and pick the papers up.

You can see how quickly, based on assumption/interpretation and lack of clarity, triggers and negative feelings can cause an argument.

- Wrap up your responses and requests for specific action with empathy

'When you tell me that you cannot trust me, I feel angry and sad because it is important to me that you trust me. Next time, would you be willing to give me the benefit of the doubt and ask me what happened from my perspective before deciding whether you feel you can trust me.

If you think that the other person might take this the wrong way you might want to frontload/package what you are going to say as follows

'When I ask what I am about to ask I hope you do not take it the wrong way. There is no intended judgement or blame, at all. I just want us to be able to be clear with each other and avoid mixed messages and misunderstanding. Is that OK?'

You might think that all this seems like hard work but the more you try out these skills and practice, hopefully, you will be able to positively influence the tone and flow of conversation, improving how you communicate, in and outside mediation.

Asking for a reflection

How do you ensure that your message is received as you would like it to be received?

There are of course verbal cues but if we want to be sure that an important message is accurately received we need to be able to check this.

It would really help me to know what you think you just heard/understand

If the reply does not reflect the message you intended you might say; *'thank you for that, it is not quite what I meant'* then try again.

If the listener resists reflecting back because they may be feeling anxious, vulnerable or angry, first empathise with them and acknowledge the feelings in them, you are sensing.

Are you annoyed because of X, Y, or is there another reason. I don't want you to think I am asking these questions to get at you or put you on the spot. It is just that it is really important for me to be sure that what is being said is understood by you in the way I intend it because...

It can really help for the listener to understand why they are being asked to reflect back. This respects their feelings and asks that they share responsibility in the accuracy and honesty of the communication

Honesty

It is often important to elicit what the person is thinking or feeling about what is being talked about or asked of them, which stimulates and creates a flow and exchange of honest open dialogue, in which ambiguity and misinterpretation is reduced and people feel more engaged and connected with what is being talked about.

I am just wondering whether you think this option would work for you?

What do you think about X's idea to do... from the children's perspective and whether is something they might like and if not, would you be willing to share your thoughts about why not..

Would you be willing to come back to mediation and if so, it would help us to understand the benefits you see in doing so

Sorry, I am a little confused about what response you had hoped for/wanted/expected from X.

Would you be willing to share with us what kind of response you had hoped for that you did not receive and why this is important to you

Is that the response you wanted/expected/hoped for

I hope you have found this guide a useful starting point to our series on good communication in mediation. Please keep an eye out for more articles and videos on this topic which you should be able to find in our coaching section of the support resources.